

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 272 953

CS 505 342

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TITLE Height as a Basis for Interpersonal Attraction.
PUB DATE 86
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Eastern Communication Association (77th, Atlantic City, NJ, April 30-May 3, 1986).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Body Height; Body Image; Comparative Analysis; *Dating (Social); Emotional Response; Females; *Interpersonal Attraction; Interpersonal Communication; Interpersonal Relationship; Males; Physical Characteristics; Social Life

ABSTRACT

Based on the observation that taller males seem to have an advantage in date/mate selection, a study investigated the role that height plays in the choice of a partner. Subjects, 594 student volunteers from communication classes at a large Mid-Atlantic university, completed a questionnaire designed to assess such factors as respondent sex, present relationship status, and height preference for an ideal partner. Results indicated that while people may prefer an ideal partnership in which the male is two or three inches taller than the female, they frequently compromise with relationships in which the height differences are less or greater than two or three inches. However, people still tend to prefer that the male be taller than the female. Height did not appear to be a significant advantage or disadvantage for women, but it did appear that being taller is a social advantage for men. (DF)

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Height as a Basis for
Interpersonal Attraction

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Abstract

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Beginning with the observation of a male taller bias in date/mate selection, this study investigated a complementary vs. a step function in choosing a stature-based primary interactant. In addition, the relative advantages or disadvantages of height were examined for both genders in the dating marketplace. Our sample of college students (N = 594) indicated that while we may use a complementary standard in a hypothetical date selection, the actual height of a chosen person is more likely to be made on a step function. Second, there appears to be no dating consequences for a female in a height related sense, but taller males do enjoy a noticeable dating advantage. Suggestions were offered integrating the present findings into past research.

Competitively selected paper presented at the Eastern
Communication Association Convention, Atlantic City, New Jersey,
April 30-May 3, 1986

CS505342

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American society appears to operate on the basis of a series of unstated yet pervasive social rules in date/mate selection. Not the least of these implicit criteria is the male-taller bias. The unwritten law of social interaction seems to be that the male must be at least as tall or taller than the female in order for any meaningful relationship to develop (Gillis & Avis, 1980; Graziano, Brothen, & Berscheid, 1978). What is not clear is the psychological selection process used in abiding by this "Cardinal principle" of date selection (Berscheid & Walster, 1974). On what basis do males select shorter females and how do females select taller males? At least two different techniques come to mind.

First, it is possible that a moving standard exists in which one's own height serves as the psychological anchor. Females, for example, might tend to choose males two or three inches taller than themselves. Males, on the other hand, would choose females two or three inches shorter than themselves. Such a date/mate selection rule would produce a complementary partner. If such a rule were followed, a strong relationship should exist between one's own height and the height of the primary interactant.

However, it is possible that a far less complex standard could be involved. Females using a more simple standard might find any male acceptable as long as he were as tall or taller than themselves. Males might accept any female as long as she were as tall or shorter than themselves. This selection rule operates on a simple step function. If this rule were followed, a weak or essentially nonexistent relationship should exist between one's own height and the height of the primary interactant.

On the other hand, the hypothesized relationships may be confounded by the failure to distinguish between that which is desirable and that which is obtainable. Everyone probably would wish for a partner who was culturally defined as attractive, psychologically compatible, and socioeconomically similar. What we would like is Galatea; what we settle for is often less. Hence, the two predictions made above must be examined for both the real and the ideal situation.

Turning to a related question of mate/date selection, a logical possibility exists that because of the male taller bias, a distinct social advantage should be observable for

taller males (Lerner & Moore, 1974). Indeed, in a field study such a finding has been suggested (Feingold, 1982), but the sample was not large ($N = 72$), and the results were based on correlations. Moreover, to compound the problem, another study seems to suggest that women are more attracted to men of medium height (5'9", 175 cm to 5'11", 180 cm) than to either short or tall men (Graziano et al., 1978). Thus, an additional purpose of this study is to investigate the presumed social advantage for tall males.

By extension of the same logic, it should also be the case that shorter females should enjoy a social advantage in the date/mate situation. By being short, the female becomes a socially appropriate partner for a much larger pool of males than her taller female counterpart. Thus, height alone should enhance the short females dating/mating prospects in the social marketplace.

In sum, this study seeks to examine the complementary vs. the step function in the selection of the ideal and real primary interaction partner. Second, the presumed social advantages for tall males and short females in interpersonal interaction situations will be examined.

Method

Subjects in this study ($N = 594$) were volunteers from communication classes taught at a large Mid-Atlantic university. A questionnaire was designed to assess respondent sex, present relationship status, height preference for an ideal partner and so forth. There were no refusals among the 276 males or 318 females surveyed.

Results and Discussion

Perhaps the first concern of any study should focus on the quality of the data. To what extent may we rely on the accuracy of self-reported heights. Fortunately, past investigations have indicated that self-reported heights are exceptionally precise (Charney, Goodman, McBride, Lyon & Pratt, 1976; Lass, Andes, McNair, Cline & Pecora, 1982) with correlations between self-reported and actual heights exceeding .95.

In considering the comparison between the complementary vs. the step function approaches to height in partner selection, a logical dilemma was encountered. Evidence exists (Bailey & Kelly, 1984) to support the notion that actually being involved with another person is sufficient to alter the judgment of what ideal means. That is, the involvement subtly alters the image of the ideal until that image comes to resemble the actual partner. For that reason, only those males who reported they were not currently involved with any other person were considered in the correlation between their own height and the height of the ideal partner. That relationship was exceedingly high ($N = 164$; $r = .513$; $r^2 = .263$). Compared with that figure was the correlation of involved male heights with the reported heights of their girlfriends. That coefficient was substantially less ($N = 110$; $r = .246$; $r^2 = .060$). The difference between these two correlations was highly significant ($t = 3.53$, $p < .001$). At least for males, these data suggest the step function is a more accurate picture of reality than the complementary function.

The story is much the same for females. Uninvolved females' height is powerfully related to the heights of their ideals ($N = 145$; $r = .574$; $r^2 = .330$). The same correlation for involved female heights with the heights of their real boyfriends is much lower ($N = 171$; $r = .250$; $r^2 = .062$). Once again the difference between these two correlations is highly significant ($t = 3.51$; $p < .001$). For females, as for males, the step function is the more accurate depiction of real life.

Finally, it is worth examining the question of whether or not the presence of a valued other significantly affected the image of an ideal. Thus we ask, among involved males and females is there a strong positive relationship between the ideal partner and the real partner? For both males ($N = 109$; $r = .690$ $r^2 = .470$) and females ($N = 170$; $r = .513$; $r^2 = .263$) the answer appears to be yes.

The answer to the initial question seems to be that when we look for a prospective partner for dating and potential marriage, the standard is that of complementary height. The compromises of the world appear to drive us in the direction of a simpler step function in terms of height for our actual selection. The confusions of the past may have been due to the lack of attention paid to the present involvement status of respondents. These data clearly suggest that would be a serious oversight.

The second set of hypotheses in this study concerns the social advantages which accrue to tall males and to short females. To accomplish this task, the self-reported heights may be compared with the reported heights of the involved others. The 276 males, for instance, may be compared with the 171 boyfriends reported by our female population. If male height plays no role in attraction, the heights of boyfriends should closely parallel that of our population. Examination of Table 1, dividing the heights into one standard deviation above and below the mean, reveals that taller males seem to enjoy a substantial dating advantage. Taller males appear at almost twice the proportion we would expect from our knowledge of the population. This appearance is highly significant whether measured by a standard chi-square ($\chi^2 = 12.80$; $p < .002$) or with the more powerful Kolmogorov-Smirnov test ($\chi^2 = 10.22$; $p < .01$).

Insert Table 1 about here

The same procedure followed for females demonstrates only a very close approximation to the population parameters ($\chi^2 = 1.87$; $p = .39$). The presumed social advantage for short females is nonexistent in this study.

These results aid us in understanding the conflicts in the past literature. If taller men enjoy a dating advantage, that advantage may translate into more and varied social experience for the taller male thereby enabling him to be more selective in the dating marketplace. Hence, Feingold (1982) was probably correct; taller men probably do have prettier girlfriends given their social advantage of height. It is also the case that several other confusing findings now fit into place. Gunderson (1965) reported that naval personnel assigned to a medium-sized aircraft carrier (the N was not reported, but it is presumably large), expressed the opinion that 72 inches (183 cm) was the optimal desired height. Ironically, 72 inches is the mean height for an

ideal male reported by the uninvolved females in this study. Moreover, the standard deviation of that ideal male height is so small ($g = .20$) that the preference for a six foot tall male is overwhelming. Of the 145 uninvolved females, 46 of them (32%) report that six feet is the ideal height for a male.

The Graziano et al. study (1978) is also placed into clearer focus. The researchers in that study were mystified when women seemed to prefer medium height men (5'9", 175 cm to 5'11", 180 cm) to either short men (5'5", 165 cm to 5'7", 170 cm) or tall men (6'2", 188 cm to 6'4", 193 cm). Graziano and his colleagues erroneously assumed that taller males *ipso facto* are more attractive. In light of the results found here, there is clearly a "ceiling effect;" at some point taller is not better for males. Graziano encountered the ceiling. Using the same categories proposed by Graziano, the same results may be replicated with the preferences of uninvolved females: 3 (2%) preferred short males, 40 (28%) preferred medium height males, while tall males were chosen by 34 (23%). Note, however, that the medium category is the closest approximation to the real choice of six feet.

In summary, then, a number of findings have emerged from the present study. First, while we may ideally want a complementary height partner, we often settle for a partner whose height meets rather simple basic requirements: for females, taller than her; for males, shorter than him. Second, height apparently does not pose a serious social advantage or disadvantage for women. Whatever the components of interpersonal attraction, height does not seem to be paramount among them for females. For men, however, being taller does appear to be an advantage. But contrary to the expectation of symmetry, it is not necessarily that the short male is disadvantaged, only that taller males enjoy an increased social advantage. Over a decade ago when Berscheid and Walster (1974) wrote that height "may account for a fair portion of attractiveness variance, particularly in men . . ." (pg. 178), they had no idea how accurate their observation was nor how long it would take to demonstrate its validity.

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Table 1

Comparison of male population with boyfriends' heights

Groups	Heights		
	Short	Medium	Tall
	-σ 5'7"- (170 cm)	5'8" to 6'1" (173 cm to 185 cm)	+σ 6'2"+ (188 cm +)
Population 276	29	207	40
100%	10.5%	75%	14.5%
Boyfriends 171	12	111	48
100%	7%	64.9%	28.1%